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ABSTRACT

This study investigated teacher and peer perceptions of aggressive behavior across grade, sex, and school type. Using student sociometric nominations and teacher ratings, perceptions of aggressive behavior were analyzed to investigate grade, sex, and school differences. African American and Latino students in third through fifth grades and their classroom teachers from two urban public schools in southern California participated in the study. The two schools differed in prevalence of violent crime in the neighborhoods surrounding the schools. It was hypothesized that older students at both schools would be perceived as less aggressive than younger students. It was also expected that students attending school in the more violent community would be perceived as more aggressive than students from the less violent neighborhood. Peer nominations for boys attending the school in the less violent community decreased dramatically across grade levels while girls remained relatively unchanged. Peer nominations for boys and girls in the more violent community remained relatively constant across grade levels. Teachers' ratings of aggression differed as a function of school type, grade, and gender. Overall, boys were perceived by teachers and peers to be considerably more aggressive than girls at both schools. Contains 23 references. (Author/SD)

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Perceptions of aggressive behavior: A look across grade, sex, and school

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Abstract

Using student sociometric nominations and teacher ratings, perceptions of aggressive behavior were analyzed to investigate grade, sex, and school differences. Predominantly African American students (N=764) in 3rd-5th grades and their classroom teachers (N=29) from two urban public schools in southern California participated in the study. The two schools differed in prevalence of violent crime in the neighborhoods surrounding the schools. Peer nominations for boys attending the school in the less violent community decreased dramatically across grade levels while girls remained relatively unchanged. Peer nominations for boys and girls in the more violent community remained relatively constant across grade levels. Teachers' ratings of aggression differed as a function of school type, grade and gender. Overall, boys were perceived by teachers and peers to be considerably more aggressive than girls at both schools.

Introduction

Children who are excessively aggressive at a young age are more likely to display aggression later in life (Olewus, 1979; Kazdin, 1987). For example, Patterson (1992) found a linear development from excessive displays of early aggressive behavior (e.g., pushing others in toddlerhood) to violence in adolescence (e.g., assault with an object).

Peer perceptions often influence social outcomes for aggressive children. For instance, the display of aggressive behavior increases children's risk for peer rejection (Coie, Lochman, Terry & Hyman, 1992; Hudley, 1994). Teachers' perceptions are also important as teachers control children's access to instructional time as well as special services. Previous research has shown that highly aggressive children are also at risk for poor school adjustment and achievement, greater than average rates of school dropout, and referral for mental health problems later in life (Coie, Dodge, & Kuperschmidt, 1990).

Younger children have less developed behavioral self-control and self-monitoring skills (Pressley, 1979). Therefore, young children may be more likely to use aggression as an interpersonal strategy. Findings on age differences in the display of childhood aggression have been inconsistent. Aggression may increase with age (Whiting & Whiting, 1975), decrease with age (Hyde, 1984; Park & Slaby, 1983), and change with the type of aggression in question (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson, & Gariepy, 1989).

Findings of sex differences in childhood aggression are also

inconsistent. Behavior may vary by the type of aggression being measured (i.e., verbal, physical) (Cairns,et al., 1989) as well as the circumstances which evoke the aggressive behavior (Deaux, 1985). However, boys are more physically aggressive than girls from early ages on (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1980).

We report perceived aggression from two perceptions, teachers and peers, as well as across the elementary grades. We also report comparisons across neighborhood type. Children living in urban areas are more likely to exhibit antisocial behavior (Quinton, 1988; California Department of Justice Statistics Center, 1995). Studies of neighborhood effects on child development in urban areas have concentrated on economically impoverished communities (McLoyd, 1990) or have focused broadly on the construct of stress (Attar, Guerra, & Tolan, 1994). However, it is not yet well understood how neighborhoods with varying characteristics affect the development of childhood aggression.

This study investigated teacher and peer perceptions of aggressive behavior across grade, sex, and school type. We hypothesized that older students at both schools would be perceived as less aggressive than younger students. We also expected that students attending school in the more violent community would be perceived as more aggressive than students from the relatively less violent neighborhood. Consistent with prior research, we expected that boys at both schools would be perceived as more aggressive when compared to girls.

Methods

- Participants were 764 African American (85%) and Latino (15%) students enrolled in one of two urban public schools in southern California.
- There was equal representation from both schools of girls (N=383) and boys (N=381), and across grades. Mean ages of participants by grade level were 8.34, 9.18, and 10.38 years (for grades 3, 4, and 5 respectively).
- In the community surrounding School 1 in 1995, residents reported 506 violent crimes (i.e., murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault). Residents of the community surrounding School 2 reported 43 violent crimes (roughly 8% of the crimes reported around School 1) (Los Angeles Police Dept., 1996).
- Sociometric questionnaire. Six weeks after the start of the fall school semester, students completed a group-wide peer nomination protocol. Using a class roster, students nominated three peers in their classrooms who best fit a variety of behavioral descriptors. We report here the three aggressive descriptors (starts fights, disrupts the group, loses his/her temper easily).
- Teacher Checklist. Teachers completed the eight-item aggression subscale of the Teacher Checklist (Coie, 1990) for every student in the class, also in the sixth week of school.

Results

Peer Nominations

- Peer aggression scores were derived by summing each child's nominations for the three aggressive behavior items on the peer protocols. The 3 peer nominations for aggression were analyzed in a multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA), with community, grade and gender as the grouping factors.
- The multivariate community type X grade X gender interaction for peer nominations of aggression was significant ($F[6, 1486] = 3.00$, $p<.01$). In subsequent univariate analyses, nominations for disrupts ($F[2, 745] = 7.44$, $p<.001$) and loses temper ($F[2, 745] = 3.58$, $p<.03$), but not fighting, remained significant.
- At School 1, nominations for both disrupts and loses temper increased somewhat for boys and remained fairly constant across grades for girls. Nominations decreased across grade for boys but increased slightly for girls at School 2.
- Nominations for fighting revealed a significant community type X gender interaction ($F[1, 745] = 28.33$, $p<.001$). Overall, both boys and girls were likely to be perceived as aggressive at School 1 by at least some peers at all grade levels. At School 2, nominations for boys decreased dramatically over the years and nominations for girls remained stable at low levels.

School 1 serves a more violent community.

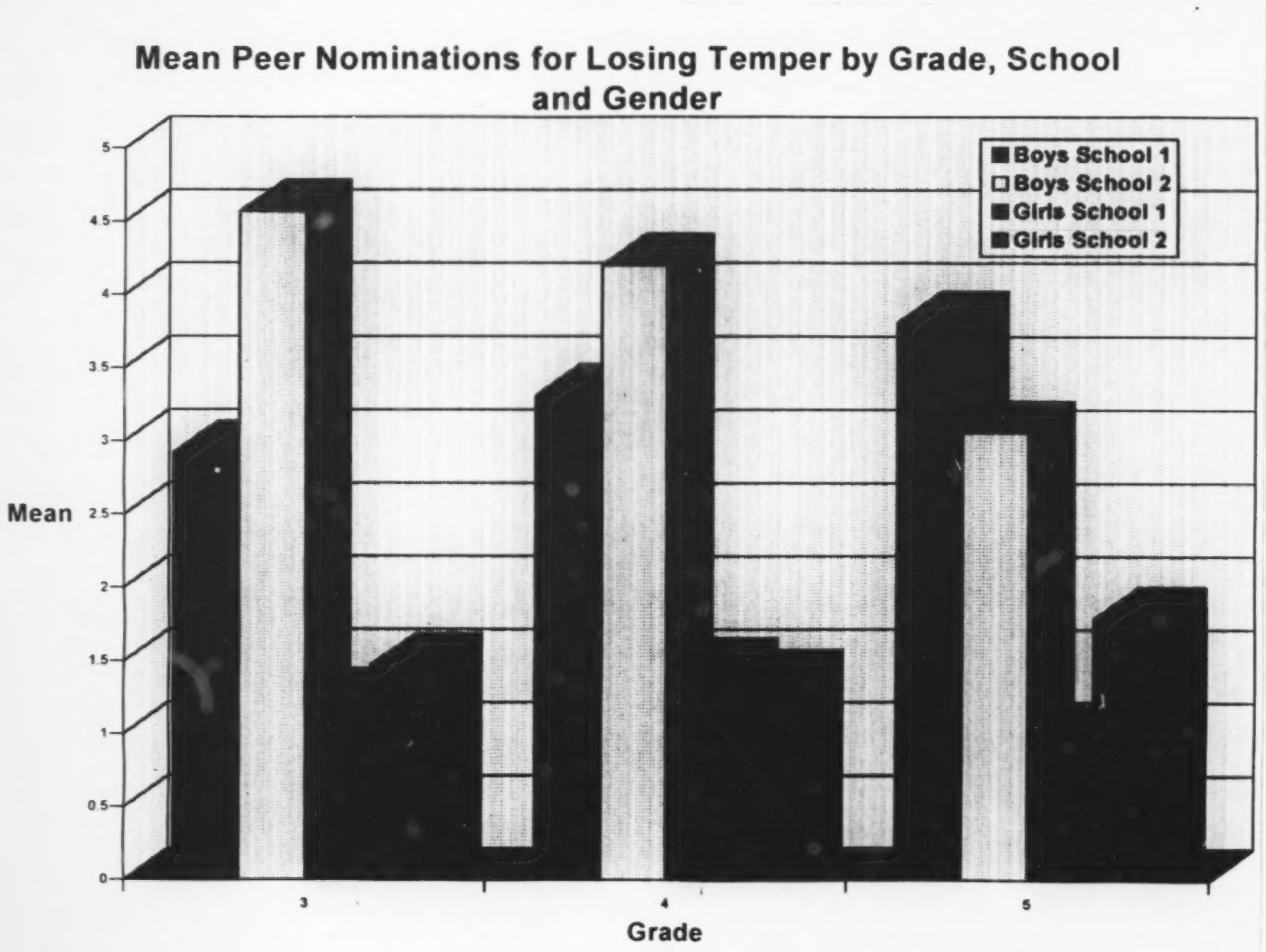
School 2 serves a less violent community.

Teacher ratings

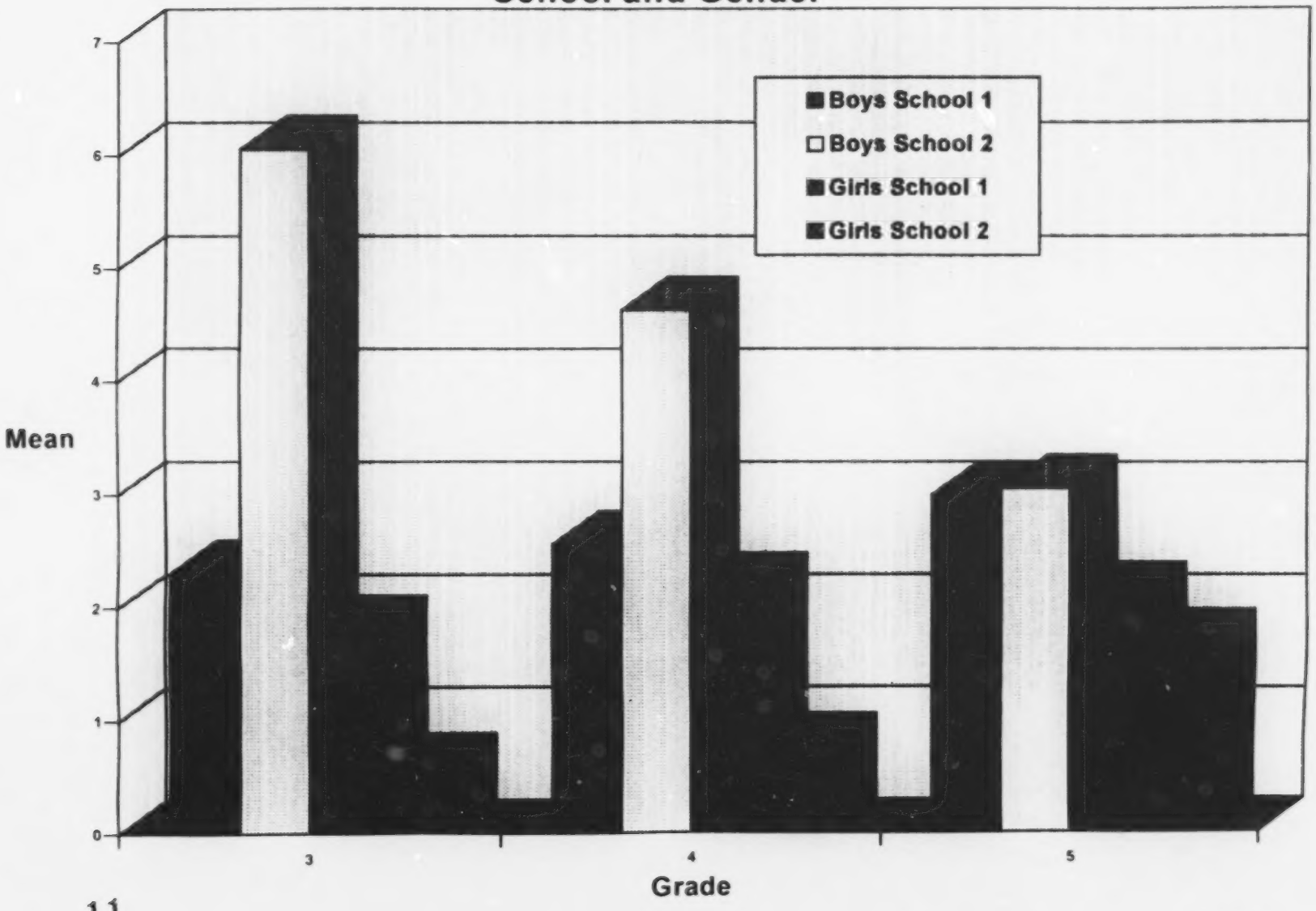
- Teacher ratings were summed to yield a total aggression score ranging from 8-40, with higher numbers indicating more perceived aggressiveness.
- There was a significant main effect of grade ($F[2, 725] = 6.90$, $p<.01$). Overall, teacher ratings of aggression decreased across the grades, with this difference between third and fifth grades much more marked at School 2.
- A multivariate analysis of the individual teacher ratings of verbal (says mean things) and physical (starts fights; uses physical force) aggression revealed a community type X gender interaction ($F[2, 725] = 6.90$, $p<.01$). Subsequent univariate analyses demonstrated significance for both verbal ($F[1, 726] = 8.44$, $p<.01$) and physical ($F[1, 726] = 9.39$, $p<.01$) aggression.
- Univariate analysis revealed a significant community type X gender interaction ($F[1, 725] = 11.38$, $p<.001$) for total scores of aggressive behavior as rated by teachers.

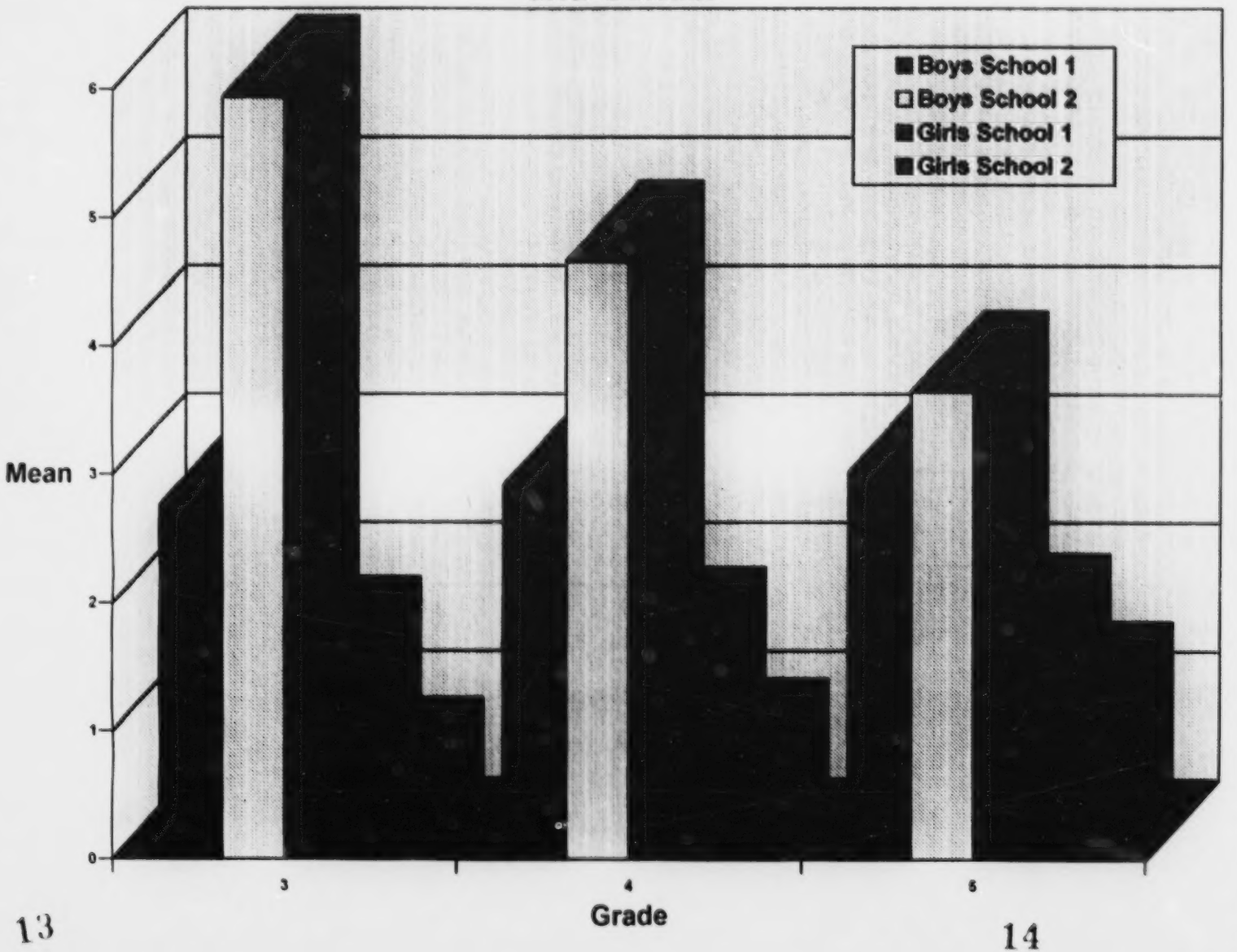
School 1 serves a more violent community.

School 2 serves a less violent community.

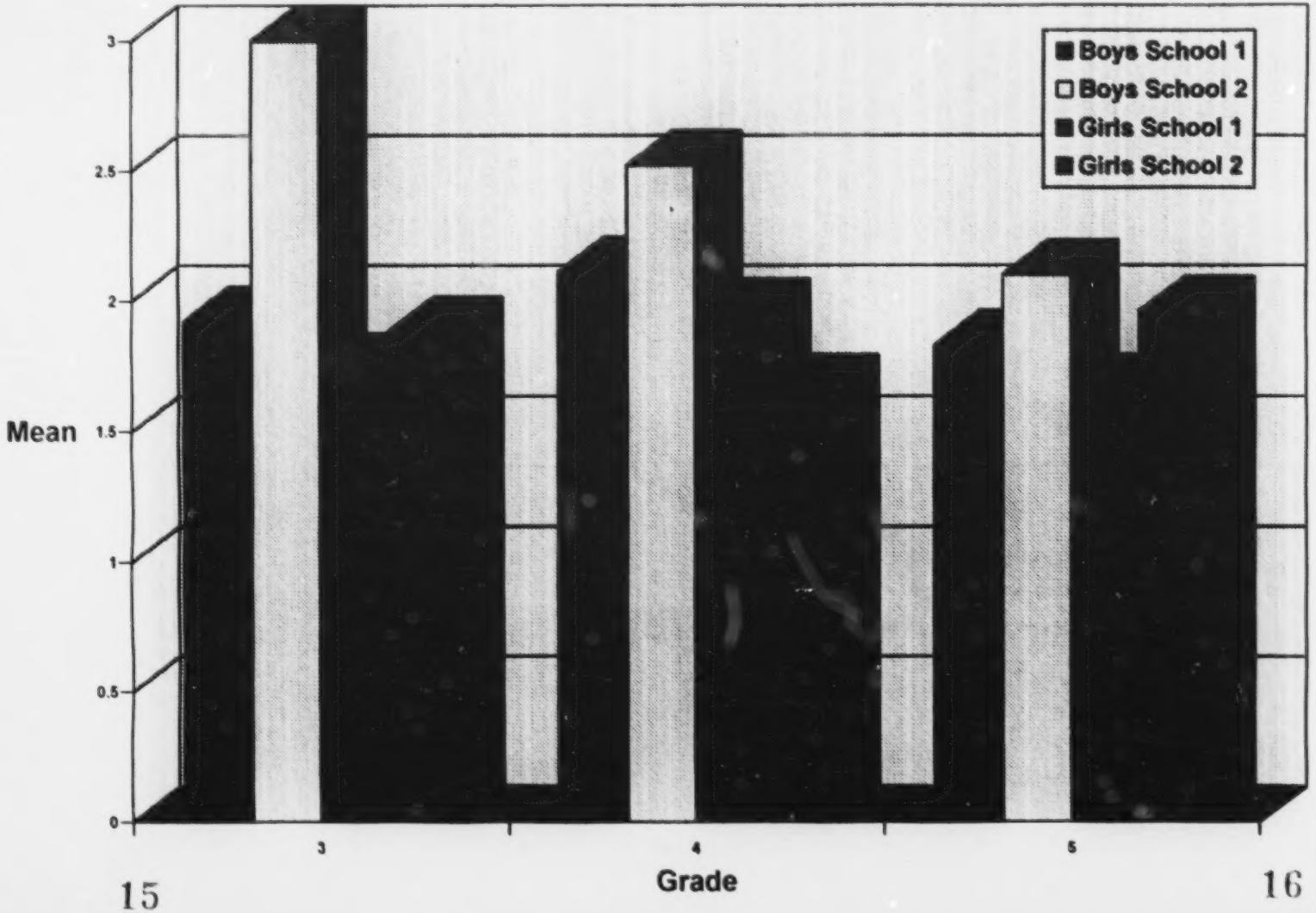

Mean Peer Nominations for Losing Temper by Grade, School and Gender
Boys School 1
Boys School 2
Girls School 1
Girls School 2
Mean
5
4.5
4
3.5
3
2.5
2
1.5
1
0.5
0
3
4
5
Grade

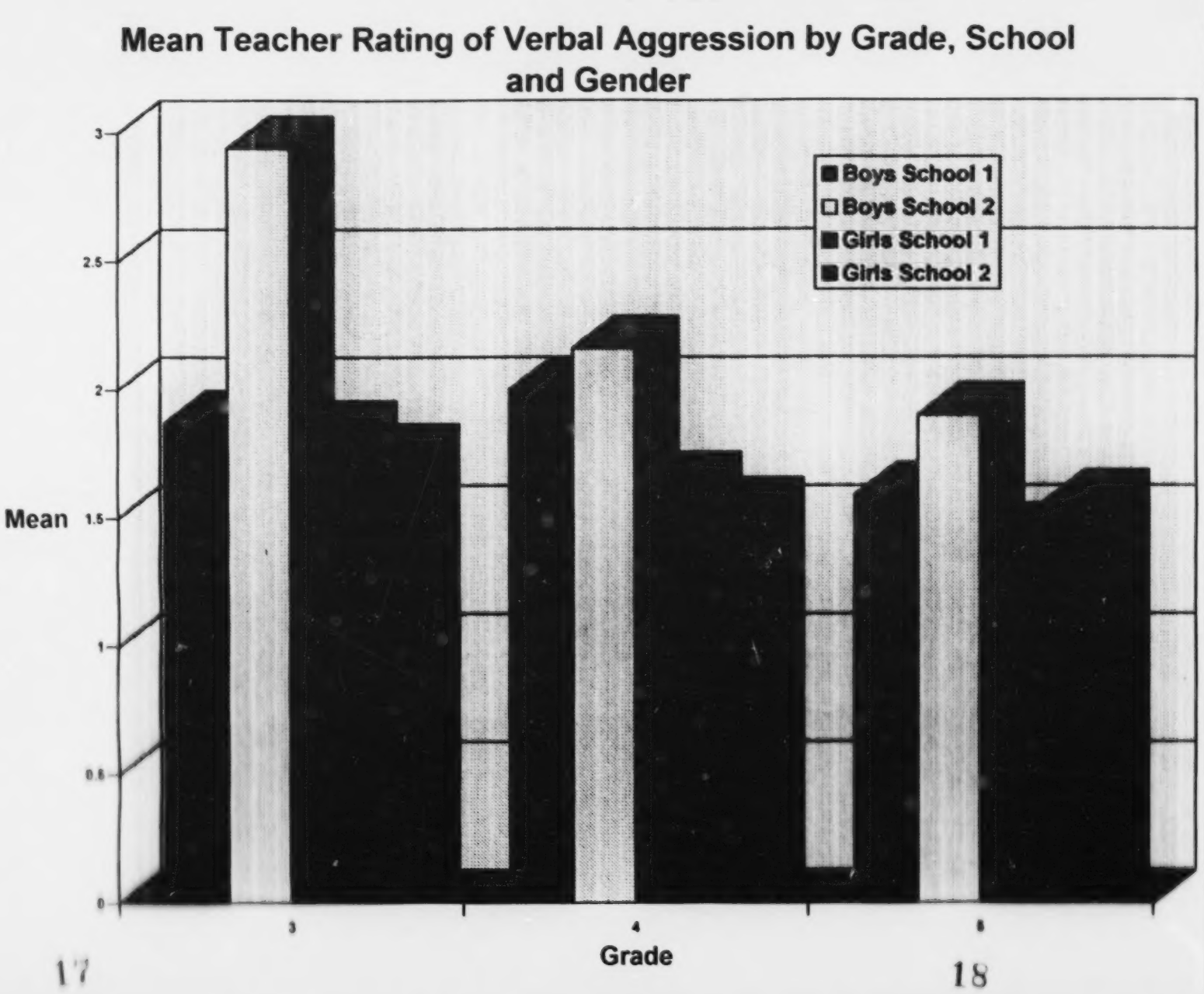
Mean Peer Nominations for Disrupting Group by Grade, School and Gender

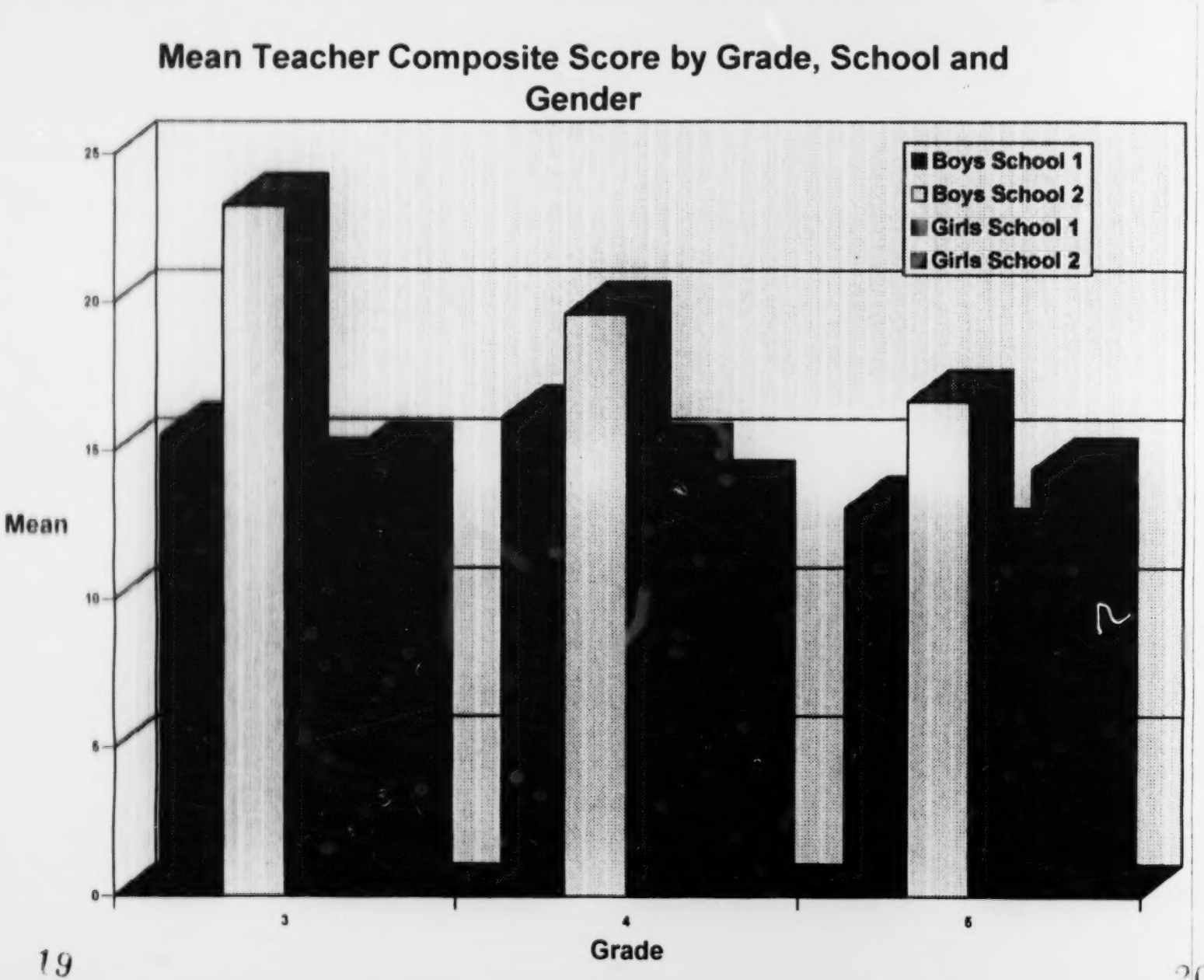



Mean Peer Nominations for Starting Fights by Grade, School and Gender
Boys School 1
Boys School 2
Girls School 1
Girls School 2
Mean
0
1
2
3
4
5
6
3
4
5
Grade

Mean Teacher Rating of Physical Aggression by Grade, School and Gender




Mean Teacher Rating of Verbal Aggression by Grade, School and Gender
Boys School 1
Boys School 2
Girls School 1
Girls School 2
Mean
3
2.5
2
1.5
1
0.5
0
3
4
5
Grade


Mean Teacher Composite Score by Grade, School and Gender
Boys School 1
Boys School 2
Girls School 1
Girls School 2
25
20
15
10
5
0
Mean
3
4
5
Grade

Discussion

Our expectation that younger children are perceived as more aggressive than older children was only partially confirmed by peer nominations as perceptions of aggression were found to differ as a function of neighborhood. Peer nominations for boys and girls attending school in the more violent community remained relatively constant across grade levels. Peer nominations for boys attending the school in the less violent community decreased dramatically across grade levels, but nominations for girls remained relatively unchanged. Young boys in the less violent neighborhood may simply be experiencing a normal developmental pattern in which behavioral self-regulation and self-control are not well mastered in the earlier grades. In the more violent community, however, both boys and girls across all grade levels are more likely to be perceived as moderately aggressive by peers. This suggests, that from the peer perspective aggression in the more violent neighborhood continues to be a fairly pervasive phenomenon even as children age and mature.

Boys were perceived by peers to be considerably more aggressive than girls across grades and schools, with student nominations for boys at the school in the less violent community as high as five times that for girls. Girls at both schools and of all ages may be more skilled than boys at regulating their physical behavior and therefore, perceived as less aggressive. Cummings, Hollenbeck, Ianotti, Radke-Yarrow and Zahn-Waxler (1986) note that levels of physical aggression are higher in boys than in girls

on average, and that boys may experience greater hostility as a result. Thus, peers may be perceiving girls as less aggressive based on the type of aggression displayed and not necessarily on the frequency of aggressive acts. In addition, the greatest disparity between genders was for third graders at the school in the less violent community. Physical aggression, which may be more characteristic of younger boys, may be more salient to peers and therefore, lead to the perception that young boys are much more aggressive than girls.

In general, teachers from both schools rated older children as less aggressive than younger children. Older children may be more skilled at regulating their behavior to meet the demands of classroom context and therefore, be perceived as less aggressive. Also, teachers may be judging younger children by standards that are developmentally inappropriate.

Inconsistent with our original hypothesis, teachers at the school in the more violent community perceived their students' behavior as more favorable in comparison to teachers' perceptions in the less violent community. Teachers' behavioral expectations may be lower for children in more violent communities (Grant & Sleeter, 1986). The more positive ratings may also be reflective of the belief that children in the more violent community are incapable of behaving in ways that would be mandatory for students from more advantaged communities (Turner, 1993).

Teachers rated boys as considerably more aggressive than

girls at both schools. Boys in the elementary school environment may be less likely than girls to meet teacher expectations. Girls who display less physical aggression may be perceived more favorably by teachers (Hudley, 1993).

Methodological limitations of the present study require that the results be interpreted with caution. The sociometric methodology employed in this study may be subject to multiple interpretations. We used closed-end, forced choice response formats and restricted student choices to their classmates. With a more inclusive pool of potential nominees, and a greater latitude in number of selections, peer data might look appreciably different. Also, the subject population was limited to African American and Latino students.

Based on these findings, it appears that persons and programs dealing with aggressive children should be sensitive to children's developmental changes and how these affect aggressive behavior. Furthermore, our results suggest that community and gender awareness should be at the root of any successful intervention. Future research might profitably duplicate this study, but with a younger population to further understand the developmental trends presented in this study. An expanded study including parents' perceptions of aggression might also provide valuable insight into the investigation of how behavioral expectations impact the persistence of childhood aggression.

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